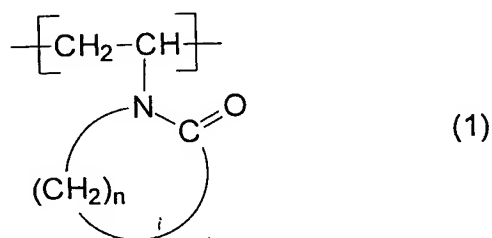


CLAIMS:

1. A water-soluble or water-swellaable crosslinked copolymer consisting essentially of

- 5 a1) 1 to 50% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula (1)

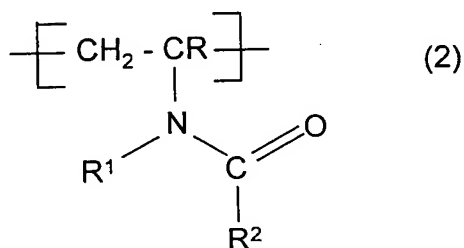


where n is an integer from 2 to 9,

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or

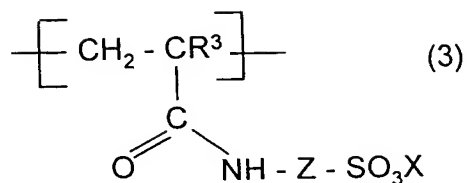
- a2) 1 to 50% by weight of a mixture of the repeating structural unit of the formula (1) and of the repeating structural unit of the formula (2)



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where R, R¹ and R² may be identical or different and are hydrogen or a linear or branched alkyl or alkenyl group having in each case 1 to 30, preferably 1 to 20, in particular 1 to 12, carbon atoms and

- b) 49.99 to 98.99% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula
20 (3)



in which R^3 is hydrogen, methyl or ethyl, Z is C_1 - C_8 -alkylene, n is an integer from 2 to 9, and X is an alkali metal or alkaline earth metal ion, and

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- c) 0.01 to 8% by weight of crosslinking structures resulting from monomers having at least two olefinic double bonds.

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2. The copolymer as claimed in claim 1, consisting essentially of 2 to 30% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula 1 or a mixture of the repeating structural units of the formulae 1 and 2, 69.5 to 97.5% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula 3 and 0.2 to 3% by weight of crosslinking structures resulting from monomers having at least two olefinic double bonds.

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3. The copolymer as claimed in claim 1, consisting essentially of 3 to 15% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula 1 or a mixture of the repeating structural units of the formulae 1 and 2, 84.5 to 96.5% by weight of the repeating structural unit of the formula 3 and 0.5 to 2% by weight of crosslinking structures resulting from monomers having at least two olefinic double bonds.

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4. The copolymer as claimed in claim 1, comprising crosslinking structures resulting from allyl (meth)acrylate.

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5. A process for the preparation of the water-soluble or water-swellaable copolymers as claimed in claim 1, which comprises dissolving or dispersing the monomers corresponding to the repeating structural units of the formulae 1, 2 and 3 in a protic solvent, adding one or more crosslinkers having at least two olefinic double bonds to this solution or dispersion, and starting the polymerization by adding a free-radical-forming compound.

6. The use of the water-soluble or water-swellaible copolymers as claimed in claim 1 as thickeners.
- 5 7. A cosmetic or pharmaceutical preparation comprising a water-soluble or water-swellaible copolymer as claimed in claim 1.